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AUTHOR Salwen, Michael B.; Garrison, Bruce
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ABSTRACT

Because little scholarly or industry research has reviewed the position of sports journalists on the matter of professionalism, a study analyzed newspaper sports journalists' evaluations of their professional orientations and their perceptions of the orientations of their colleagues who write "hard" and "soft" news. The study employed a national mail survey of 624 members of the Associated Press Sports Editors in 1988; 249 usable responses were received for a reponse rate of 40 percent. The sports journalists were overwhelmingly white males. Respondents evaluated a scale of 20 professional and non-professional items. Results indicated that: (1) based on a scale of professional items the sports journalists rated themselves higher than their peers who write hard news and soft news; and (2) on a scale of "nonprofessional" items they generally rated themselves as no different from their colleagues in hard news and soft news. (Three tables of data and 24 notes are included.) (MS)

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PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATIONS OF SPORTS JOURNALISTS: THEIR ROLE IN JOURNALISM

Michael B. Salwen

and

Bruce Garrison

News-Editorial and Photocommunication Program
P.O. Box 248127
School of Communication
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124

A paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Newspaper Division, Washington, D.C., August 1989.

Michael B. Salwen and Bruce Garrison are assistant and associate professors, respectively, in the News-Editorial and Photocommunication Program of the School of Communication at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla. The authors gratefully acknowledge assistance from the School's dean, Edward J. Pfister.

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150-WORD ABSTRACT

PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATIONS OF SPORTS JOURNALISTS: THEIR ROLE IN JOURNALISM

Michael Salwen and Bruce Garrison
School of Communication, University of Miami
P.O. Box 248127
Coral Gables, FL 33124

There is growing interest in professionalism in journalism. Because little scholarly or industry research has reviewed the position of sports journalists on the matter of profesionalism, this study analyzed newspaper sports journalists' evaluations of their professional orientations and their perceptions of the orientations of their colleagues who write "hard" and "soft" news.

The study employed a national mail survey of 249 members of the Associated Press Sports Editors in 1988, a response rate of 40 percent. Respondents evaluated a scale of 20 professional and non-professional items developed from McLeod and Hawley.

Though these sports journalists see similarities and differences among themselves and hard and soft news writers, they generally expressed closer affinity with hard news writers. While this study reports their perceptions, there is desire on the part of this group to be viewed with other occupations that call themselves professions. The sports journalists viewed themselves professionally higher than their hard and soft news peers. But on non-professional items, the sports journalists rated themselves not different from their colleagues.

Paper presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, Washington, D.C., August 1989.

PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATIONS OF SPORTS JOURNALISTS:
THEIR ROLE IN JOURNALISM

Journalism scholars have paid little attention to sports journalism, even though sports accounts for 20 percent of the editorial content in metropolitan daily newspapers (1). More than 19 percent of the nation's newspaper reporters are assigned to sports beats, more than any other single beat, including politics or general assignment (2). Although some editors are apologetic for the large proportion of ostensibly escapist sports news, reader surveys repeatedly report that readers want more sports news (3). But little is known about sports journalists and how they view their roles in journalism. This study analyzed the professional orientations of members of the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) and their perceptions of the professional orientations of their colleagues who write hard and soft news.

The trend in journalism throughout this century has been marked by a growing interest in professionalism (4). This trend has generally been viewed as a positive thing (5). As it was observed in a recent review of the literature on journalistic professionalism: "It is simply assumed that any occupation worth its salt aspires to the most desirable of occupational forms, that of the profession" (6).

But not all media practitioners and scholars agree that journalism is a profession (7), and some contend that journalists should not even strive to become a profession (8). Regardless of this debate, most sports journalists believe they will receive more respect from their peers and the public if sports writing is regarded as a profession. Professionals are viewed as possessing desirable characteristics, such as formal training, education, a unique knowledge and practice, and freedom and autonomy (9). In journalism lore, sports journalists have been portrayed as possessing few of these noble characteristics. They have been criticized for hackneyed writing, cheering for the home team, unwillingness to report critical issues, and gladly accepting "freebies" and engaging in other questionable activities (10).

Most observers agree there have been improvements in sports journalism over the years, but it is not clear to what extent. Craig Neff, a senior sports writer at Sports Illustrated, argues that many of today's sports writers continue to be awed the sports stars and report uncritically about them (11) Former Associated Press general sports editor Wick Temple, however, maintains that "cheerleading" for the home town and other negative traits associated with sports journalism are disappearing (12). He predicts it will take another decade, however, for these problems to be resolved. Temple's view is buttressed by the results of a 1982 survey of 175 sports editors and executive sports editors of American daily newspapers that found sports

editors believe that sports writing is improving and cheerleading is decreasing (13).

Garrison goes further than Neff and Temple and argues that sports journalism's worse abuses ended a quarter century ago and since then sports journalism "has become as sophisticated as the city desk and has turned the corner into legitimate journalism" (14). Some content analyses of newspaper sports coverage suggest that the news media are reporting more serious sports stories, but many of these stories are coming from journalists outside sports and are being reported in the news sections of the newspapers (15).

Research has yet to examine whether sports journalists perceive themselves as professionals, especially in relation to their colleagues. This study surveyed upper-level sports journalists' evaluations of their "professional orientations" using a scale that, with minor modifications, has been used to gauge journalistic professionalism for the last quarter century. Part of the reason the research on professionalism in sports journalism is unclear is that the entire field of journalism has changed over the years, especially regarding the level of professionalism. Therefore, it is imperative to examine how sports journalists view their professional roles relative to other journalists in a changing field.

As a result of this discussion, this study addressed two research questions:

(1) Do sports journalists see themselves as professionals?

(2) How do sports journalists view their level of professionalism relative to their peers who write hard news and soft news?

Method

The empirical study of journalists' professional orientations became popular with McLeod and Hawley's seminal study of 115 editorial employees at two Milwaukee daily newspapers (16). They constructed a 24-item scale, with half the items representing professional orientations and the other half representing job rewards and benefits that have been referred to as "non-professional orientations" (17). McLeod and Hawley found that professional orientations are positively associated with ethical concerns, criticisms of one's employer and job, job independence, and a concern with prestige.

The scale and subsequent modifications of the scale have been successfully used to measure journalistic professionalism in different countries and among different types of journalists, including photojournalists and public relations practitioners (18). While the scale has shown itself to be valid in different job-related and cultural contexts, there have been questions about how to analyze the data. In the original McLeod and Hawley study, professional

orientations were calculated by subtracting the sum of each respondent's non-professional responses from professional responses (19). Administering professional and non-professional items is useful to avoid response set problems. But some critics charge that the non-professional items have been wrongly interpreted as "anti-professional" items. Was it not possible, they asked, to score high on both sets of items? And does scoring high on the non-professional items somehow detract from a high score on the professional items? (20).

Self-administered questionnaires were mailed to all members of the Associated Press Sports Editors association, a national group consisting largely of newspaper sports section managers and veteran writers, during June 1988. Upon request, APSE provided a current list of 624 members. A second mailing was sent during October 1988. A total of 249 usable responses were returned, a 40 percent response rate. While this response rate is low, it is not out of line for mail surveys.

Respondents evaluated 20 items, half of which were professional items and other half 10 non-professional items (21).

The ten professional items were: (a) opportunity for originality and initiative, (b) time for self-improvement, (c) prestige in the community, (d) opportunity to make full use of ability and training, (e) a job that is valuable and essential to society, (f) having an influence on important decisions, (g) opportunity to influence public thinking, (h)

freedom from continual close supervision, (i) respect for the ability of co-workers, and (j) opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge.

The ten non-professional items were: (a) enjoyment of what's involved in doing the job, (b) excitement and variety, (c) prestige within the organization, (d) availability of support, (e) a job with a respected organization, (f) a job that brings contact with important people, (g) being with congenial people, (h) security of the job, (i) salary: earning a good living, and (j) getting ahead in the organization.

The professional and non-professional items were randomly presented in each of three lists. Respondents evaluated how important they believed (a) "hard news" writers, (b) "soft news writers," and (c) they themselves regarded the items. Responses (very important, somewhat important, unimportant and very unimportant) were coded from +2 to -2 with the middle-range response "neither important or unimportant" coded as zero. The broad categories of hard and soft news were used instead of specific categories such as business news, political news, life style news and so forth because these two categories succinctly covered many specific categories. Though the terms "hard news" and "soft news" may appear ambiguous to the uninitiated, they are commonly used and understood in journalism, appearing in standard journalism texts. Hard news writers are thought to report "serious" news, such as public affairs and politics.

Soft news writers, by contrast, are thought to report less serious news, such as life style and "soft" features (22).

Results

The sports journalists were overwhelmingly white males. Only ten of the respondents were female. One was black. Two were Hispanic. The typical sports journalist in this survey worked a median 14-15 years in journalism, excluding years in college and high school journalism. About 70 percent of the respondents held a college degree. Another 15 percent either took some post-graduate classes or held a graduate degree. Most of the other respondents at least went to college, even if they did not attain a degree. Only three respondents (1 percent) said they had a high school degree or less education. Though these findings point to a white, male, well-educated group, it should be stressed that members of the APSE include mostly managers and editors, not many rank and file sports journalists (23). When directly asked whether "journalism should be regarded as a profession," 60 percent strongly agreed and another 30 percent agreed. Only eight respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (3 percent). The rest were unsure or gave no response.

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for the professional items, evaluated as how important the respondents believed the items applied to themselves (self), and their perceptions of how hard news writers (hard) and

soft news writers (soft) view the professional items. Analysis of variance on the self, hard and soft results of each item was computed. When ANOVAs attained significance at $p < .05$, a post hoc Fischer's LSD (least significant difference) test was computed to point to which means were significantly different from each other. The post-hoc tests were computed at the stringent $p < .001$ level. The items are listed in order from the highest F-ratios (24). Nine of the ten ANOVAs attained significance, all at $p < .001$. Only the item "Prestige in the community" did not achieve statistical significance. Means for each item that appear in bold are significantly higher than the other two means; those that are underlined are significantly lower than the other two.

Table 1 goes about here

One observation that is apparent is that respondents evaluated themselves significantly higher than hard and soft news writers on three of the professional items ("Opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge," "respect for ability of co-workers," and "Opportunity to make full use of ability and training"). The respondents did not evaluate themselves lowest on any of the professional items. By contrast, respondents evaluated hard news writers

significantly lower than themselves and soft news writers on three of the items ("Opportunity for originality and initiative," "Time for self-improvement," and "Freedom from continual close supervision"). Hard news writers were evaluated highest on one item ("A job that is valuable and essential to society"). Soft news writers were evaluated lowest on three items ("Having an influence on important decisions," "A job that is valuable and essential to society," and "Freedom from continual close supervision"). Closer scrutiny of these nine professional items that attained significance permits us to infer whether sports journalist feel closer to hard news or soft news writers, and in what respects.

With several items the sports journalists viewed themselves as closer to soft news writers than hard news writers. With "Opportunity for originality and initiative," "Time for self-improvement" and "Freedom from continual close supervision," the sports journalists saw themselves as no different than soft news writers, while the hard news writers were judged significantly lower than the other two groups.

On two items, the sports journalists viewed themselves as having more in common with hard news writers than soft news writers. With "Having an influence on important decisions" and "Opportunity to influence public thinking," the sports journalists saw themselves as no different than

hard news writers, while soft news writers were judged significantly lower than the other two groups.

Regarding the last four items, sports journalists viewed themselves as significantly different than both hard and soft news writers. With three of these four items they viewed themselves as significantly higher than the other writers ("Opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge," "Respect for ability of co-workers" and "Opportunity to make full use of ability and training"). With the last of these four items ("A job that is valuable and essential to society"), the hard news writers were evaluated significantly higher than the others while the soft news writers were evaluated significantly lower and sports journalists fell somewhere inbetween.

Table 2 reports the same analyses as that in Table 1 with the non-professional items. Again, the ANOVAs on nine of the items attained significance. In this case, five of the items were evaluated significantly lower than the other groups while only one of the items was judged significantly higher than the other groups.

Table 2 goes about here

The sports journalists evaluated themselves as significantly lower than hard and soft news writers on one

item ("A job that brings contact with important people"). Soft news writers were evaluated significantly lower on one item than hard and soft writers ("Availability of support"). Hard news writers were evaluated lower on three items than the other two groups ("Being with congenial people," "Enjoyment of what's involved in doing the job" and "Excitement and variety"). The hard news writers were evaluated highest on one item ("Prestige within the organization").

To obtain a broader understanding of how sports journalists view themselves compared to hard and soft news writers, Table 3 reports the analyses of the grand means of the professional and non-professional items. The respondents evaluated themselves highest in both the professional and non-professional items (Table 3.1). The analysis of variance of the six grand means are significant at $p < .001$ (Table 3.2). The Fischer's LSD post-hoc matrix (Table 3.3) shows the sports journalists viewed themselves as significantly higher than the hard and soft news writers regarding the professional items. However, there were no differences regarding how the sports journalists viewed themselves in relation to hard and soft news writers regarding the non-professional items. The correlations among the six grand means show a modest amount of common variance, with coefficients of determination ranging from 17 to 44 percent common variance (Table 3.4).

Tables 3.1 to 3.4 go about here

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that today's upper tier newspaper sports journalists view themselves as professionals. The sports journalists evaluated their professional orientations in relation to their colleagues who write hard news and soft news. Overall, based on a scale of professional items, the 249 sports journalists rated themselves professionally higher than their peers who write hard news and soft news. On a scale of "non-professional" items, they generally rated themselves as no different than their colleagues in hard news and soft news.

In some matters sports journalists regard themselves as closer to hard news writers than soft news writers. With two items dealing with the ability to "influence" important decisions and public thinking, sports journalists viewed themselves as similar to hard news writers. In these matters, the sports journalists rated soft news writers as significantly lower than themselves and hard news writers. In other matters, however, sports journalists saw themselves as similar to soft news writers. With three items dealing with creativity, self-improvement and job freedom, sports journalists viewed themselves as similar to soft news

writers. In these matters, sports journalists rated hard news writers as significantly lower than than themselves and soft news writers. Regarding three other items dealing self-improvement, respect for co-workers and ability to use one's training, the sports journalists viewed themselves as superior to both hard and soft news writers. Overall, regarding the sports journalists evaluations of their professional orientations relative to their colleagues, they saw themselves as possessing the best professional characteristics of hard news writers (i.e., influence) and soft news writers (i.e., creativity) and other desirable characteristics that neither soft and hard news writers possess.

When it came to non-professional items, the results were not as clear. Some critics charge that the two scales are not related and non-professional items should not interpreted as anti-professional items. The sports journalists evaluated hard news writers lower than themselves and soft news writers on three non-professional items dealing with a desire to work with congenial people, enjoying the job and excitement and variety. The hard news writers were rated highest regarding an interest in prestige within the organization.

Though sports writers see similarities and differences among themselves and hard and soft news writers, they generally expressed closer affinity with hard news writers. The results of this study point to perceptions rather than

reality, and there is no dispute that there is probably a good deal of social desirability in perceiving oneself as highly professional and possessing the best characteristics in the field of journalism. Such results point to the desire of sports journalists to be viewed with other occupations that proudly call themselves professions. This study casts light on how the upper tier of sports journalism views professionalism. To get a more comprehensive understanding of how sports journalists view their roles in journalism, more needs to be known about the on-the-street sports journalists.

Footnotes

1 John Stevens, "The Rise of the Sports Page," Gannett Center Journal, 1:1-11 (Fall 1987), p. 8.

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TABLE 1

ANALYSES OF PROFESSIONAL ITEMS

ITEM	MEANS, SDs SELF	HARD	SOFT	ANOVA* TSS	WSS	F	SIG	POST-HOC** SE*-H	SE-SO	H-SO
Opportunity for originality and initiative	1.61 .50	1.19 .85	1.79 .72	315	271	59.4	.001	*	NS	*
Having an influence on important decisions	.80 .99	.71 .92	-.05 .98	774	670	56.1	.001	NS	*	*
A job that is valuable and essential to society	.66 .89	1.07← .83	.26 .93	646	565	51.3	.001	*	*	*
Opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge	1.29← .67	.82 .80	.92 .74	431	401	26.4	.001	*	*	NS
Respect for ability of co-workers	1.10← .68	.70 .70	.72 .72	457	433	20.0	.001	*	*	NS
Opportunity to influence public thinking	.48 1.19	.65 .93	.07 1.03	842	798	19.5	.001	NS	*	*
Time for self-improvement	1.20 .71	.85 .69	1.09 .67	363	348	16.0	.001	*	NS	*
Opportunity to make full use of ability and training	1.27← .65	1.07 .75	1.00 .76	391	381	9.2	.001	*	*	NS
Freedom from continual close supervision	.83 .93	.57 .88	.90 1.10	682	667	7.8	.001	*	NS	*
Prestige in the Community	.18 1.07	.17 1.02	.35 .96	745	740	2.4	NS	----------		

*ANOVAs were computed with two degrees of freedom. SE= Self; H=Hard news SO=Soft news.

**Post-hoc analyses were computed at $p < .001$.

← Bold

TABLE 2

ANALYSES OF NON-PROFESSIONAL ITEMS

ITEM	MEANS, SDs SELF	HARD	SOFT	ANOVA* TSS	WSS	F	SIG	POST-HOC** SE-H	SE-SO	H-SO
Being with congenial people	.63 .88	-.05 1.20	.63 .69	780	706	38.1	.001	*	NS	*
Enjoyment of what's involved in doing the job	1.57 .54	1.21 .72	1.57 .51	269	248	30.3	.001	*	NS	*
A job that brings contact with important people	-.13 1.02	.35 .94	.41 .96	730	686	22.8	.001	*	*	NS
Excitement and Variety	1.28 .65	1.08 .84	1.43 .58	370	355	15.2	.001	*	NS	*
Availabil'ty of support	1.01 .83	.88 .81	.68 .85	507	493	9.6	.001	NS	*	*
Prestige within the organization	.76 1.07	1.12 1.02	.68 .96	1010	984	9.5	.001	*	NS	*
Security of the job	1.21 1.19	.90 .78	1.03 1.03	810	798	5.3	.01	*	NS	NS
A job with a respected organization	1.22 .68	1.20 .70	1.04 .72	357	352	4.8	.01	NS	NS	NS
Salary: earning a good living	1.23 .72	1.05 .80	1.12 .75	414	410	3.5	.05	NS	NS	NS
Getting ahead in the organization	.80	.81	.69	447	445	1.6	NS	----------		

*ANOVAs were computed with two degrees of freedom. SE= Self; H=Hard news; SO=Soft news.

**Post-hoc analyses were computed at $p < .001$.

← Bold

TABLE 3

ANALYSES OF GRAND MEANS

TABLE 3.1: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

	MEAN	SD
Professional self (PRO-SE)	.94	.44
Professional hard (PRO-H)	.78	.39
Professional soft (PRO-SO)	.71	.45
Non-professional self (N-SE)	.96	.45
Non-professional hard (N-H)	.86	.44
Non-professional soft (N-SO)	.92	.42

TABLE 3.2: ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

Total SS:	276.3
Between SS:	264.6
Within SS:	11.7
DF:	5
Mean square:	2.3
F-Ratio:	12.5
Probability:	.001

TABLE 3.3: POST-HOC SIGNIFICANCE TEST (FISHER'S LSD)*

	PRO-H	PRO-SO	N-SE	N-H	N-SO
PRO-SE	**	**	NS	NS	NS
PRO-H	--	NS	**	NS	**
PRO-SO	--	--	**	**	**
N-SE	--	--	--	NS	NS
N-H	--	--	--	--	NS

TABLE 3.4: CORRELATION COEFFICIENT (PEARSON-PRODUCT MOMENT)**

	PRO-H	PRO-SO	N-SE	N-H	N-SO
PRO-SE	.60	.56	.61	.46	.52
PRO-H	---	.59	.49	.56	.51
PRO-SO	---	---	.41	.50	.62
N-SE	---	---	---	.56	.54
N-H	---	---	---	---	.66

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* Post hoc analyses significant at $p < .001$.

** All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.